

Authentic Inclusion™ Drives Disruptive Innovation

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Authentic Inclusion™

The institutional insight that human diversity is at the core of disruptive innovation. It calls for holistic actions across all parts of an institution to respect an individual human's ability to make a difference not in spite of, but because of their difference. By putting humans first, prosperity can have longevity because principle, purpose, and profit are harmoniously aligned

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Chapter 1

What Is Authentic Inclusion and Why Is It a Business Imperative?

Difference has value. This is not a new concept. Whether it's in the form of a new line of thinking, an external perspective, or an unconventional action, getting “outside of the box” is a tried-and-true method to generate new energy and ideas. Difference creates synergy. It promotes understanding. It fuels creativity and innovation. And because we live in a world full of differences—different abilities, ages, and cultural backgrounds, to name just a few—it only makes sense that our lives reflect these differences.

I could spend many pages talking about how difference is beneficial in a general sense, but you've almost certainly heard it before. People are discussing the importance of diversity and inclusion in every facet of society. What I would like to focus on is how those elements play out in a business context, and more specifically, in the tech world. As IBM's first Chief Accessibility Officer, working with people with disabilities firsthand for over a decade, and a longtime specialist in digital inclusion, innovation, and accessibility, tech is where I have the most to say.

The synergy, understanding, and innovation that difference promotes are essential in the tech world—and in the business world at large. As such, we must find ways to not just acknowledge its worth, but to harness it effectively. In other words, we must embrace Authentic Inclusion.

What Is Authentic Inclusion?

Authentic Inclusion, as I define it within the business realm, is the institutional insight that human diversity is at the core of disruptive innovation. It calls for holistic actions across all parts of an organization to respect an individual human's ability to make a difference, not in spite of, but *because of their difference*. By putting humans first, prosperity can have longevity because principle, purpose, and profit are harmoniously aligned.

As I mentioned, this is not a new idea. Numerous studies and articles have addressed the subject over the past decade. The authors of a 2013 *Harvard Business Review* article, “How Diversity Can Drive Innovation,” wrote, “New research provides compelling evidence that diversity unlocks innovation and drives market growth—a finding that should intensify efforts to ensure that executive ranks both embody and embrace the power of differences.”¹

And in 2017, *Forbes* published a study, “Fostering Innovation Through a Diverse Workforce,” which stated, “Diversity is a key driver of innovation and is a critical component of being successful on a global scale. Senior executives are recognizing that a diverse set of experiences, perspectives, and backgrounds is crucial to innovation and the development of new ideas.”²

A simple Google search on “diversity and innovation” will return many results with articles like those quoted above. And yet, anyone who has read the news lately is also aware of the diversity problems in the tech world—problems that have led to high-profile

¹ Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Melinda Marshall, and Laura Sherbin, “How Diversity Can Drive Innovation,” *Harvard Business Review*, December 2013, <https://hbr.org/2013/12/how-diversity-can-drive-innovation>.

² “Fostering Innovation Through a Diverse Workforce,” *Forbes* Insights, 2017, https://images.forbes.com/forbesinsights/StudyPDFs/Innovation_Through_Diversity.pdf.

harassment and discrimination lawsuits at some of Silicon Valley's biggest companies. I could list them here, but that doesn't seem productive. This issue goes well beyond a few specific companies; it's part of a broader culture. And, unfortunately, there will probably be more of these lawsuits before the problem is solved. Moreover, it indicates that, despite the fact that we know diversity is good for business, our practices don't really reflect that.

So, where is the disconnect? Why aren't all the smart, influential people leading the tech sector embracing Authentic Inclusion in their companies with a sense of urgency? I've heard a number of answers to that question: *It's too expensive . . . The ROI is too difficult to calculate . . . We hired a consultant to help us figure that out . . .* and so on.

It's a complex issue, to be sure. Changing a company's culture and operation is not a simple task—especially when it's been ingrained over the years, and when the industry at large maintains the same perspective and practices. But it's not something that anyone can afford to ignore. Without Authentic Inclusion, companies risk many things—from a lack of innovation to brand damage—all of which stand to have a negative impact on profits.

What Is It *Not*?

Authentic Inclusion is not a general inclusion discussion. There are plenty of people out there talking about inclusion. The discussion I want to have is anchored in the business world: the institutional practice of placing diversity at the heart of operations and innovation.

It's not charity. There's nothing wrong with approaching something with an attitude of empathy, or wanting to "help" someone. But that's not what this is about. Authentic

Inclusion is a holistic business practice that can lead to growth and longevity for your company.

It is not something that can be outsourced or assigned to a single department, such as Human Resources. This needs to be embraced companywide, starting with buy-in from the people at the top. If those in the boardroom and the executive suite are not involved, there is very little chance that a company will be able to effect this kind of broad, cultural and business process transformation.

It's not just about people—it's also about technology. Of course, you are investing in diverse talent when you hire. But you must also invest in the technology necessary to support, enable, and adapt to everyone you bring on board.

It's not something you can afford to ignore. If you want disruptive innovation—as opposed to just incremental progress—you need to have very diverse thinkers and workers in your company. People often argue that it costs too much money to do this. But the fact is, if you factor these things in from the beginning, then it won't cost you “extra”—it will simply be part of the fabric of your business.

It's not something best dealt with in crisis mode. Without the proactive, embedded principles of an inclusive thinking, practice, operation, and organization, companies open themselves up to scandals, lawsuits, and brand damage. Then, they will often try to solve the problem by throwing money at it through consultants, studies, and new positions. There is nothing wrong with these additions, in and of themselves. But if you can establish Authentic Inclusion as a foundation of your company early on, you can avoid the long-term effects of catastrophes like public lawsuits in the first place.

It's not just about people with disabilities. My experience in working as Chief Accessibility Officer with a primary focus on enabling people with disabilities and the aging to achieve parity gave me the insight that this is about humanity in general.

Why Is It So Important Now?

From the smartphones in our pockets to the artificial intelligence being developed for nearly every purpose imaginable, it is hard to deny that technology is becoming a critical part of human existence. I believe that within the span of the next decade, any human job that can be codified has the potential to be replaced by artificial intelligence.

I am not talking about a dystopian future of warring robots. I am talking about the steady and inevitable growth of technology that's happening now, and at a very swift pace. The struggle to find harmony between technology and humanity is going to become a very real issue.

We are already seeing it crop up in our culture—from smartphone addiction, fake news, and online bullying, to job application sites that preemptively exclude blind applicants. The longer we ignore the human aspects of technology, from its development to its usage, the greater a disadvantage we are creating for humanity.

So, as the machines become smarter and more human-like, the humans must become more human to manage or outsmart the machines. And in the tech sector in particular, it's crucial that in the race to innovate, companies do not lose sight of humanity. After all, the main purpose of technology is to solve human problems, right? If we were to hashtag this imperative, it would be #HumanFirst.

We need to consider the human attributes that a machine cannot codify as easily—things like creativity, empathy, and collaboration—or character traits like persistence and grit. What we consider to be “soft skills” are going to become some of the most critical proficiencies for managing technology, especially at the AI level. This is why Authentic Inclusion is both urgent and crucial.

Technology Made Human

My understanding of Authentic Inclusion has grown throughout my career as I dealt with inclusion challenges in the business and tech worlds for over three decades. During my last job at IBM, I worked to solve the issues faced by people with disabilities or different abilities in our workforce. I’ve come to see that people’s productivity and quality of life can be significantly improved or hindered by their interactions with technology. People who do not fit the standard mold can be completely barred from participation if technology is not part of the thinking from the start. But when it’s taken into account, they can be empowered to add tremendous value. To factor in the human experience, we must consider its breadth and depth, and include diverse voices in the conversation.

For instance, my own experience getting older has driven home a statistical reality: our population is aging. A large generation of people with years of accumulated knowledge and expertise—and the aging bodies that come with that—will have needs to accommodate. If your company has embraced a philosophy of Authentic Inclusion, then you will already have the infrastructure and culture necessary to enable aging employees to continue working productively. And because you have the infrastructure and

understanding in place already, you can leverage them to serve your aging customers—a double win.

It's obvious, but still bears saying: no one is exempt from the aging process. And as the retirement age continues to rise, more accommodations will be necessary for all of us. This is just a fact of life.

As a naturalized American citizen, I am also keenly aware of the potential for America's role in the charge to humanize our approach to technology. America was built on a foundation of innovation and differences. People from all over the world—myself included—have come here over the decades and centuries, to make a life and take part in the American Dream. If any country is going to be a leader in Authentic Inclusion, it should be the United States.

That's not to say that Authentic Inclusion is solely an American idea. The concept is relevant anywhere in the world that businesses exist. But I believe that the US should own it.

The US has the foundation—from the Bill of Rights to the Constitution—supporting the idea that everybody should be equal. I don't want to sound too idealistic, but I truly believe that the US can and should be a moral leader in this area. Supporting people's differences for the sake of innovation and profitability seems to me like a distinctly American notion.

In the chapters to come, we'll discuss the future of innovation and profitability—topics that concern all of us in the business realm—and how they can be achieved through Authentic Inclusion. I hope these ideas will resonate with you.

To begin, I will tell you more about what led me to this subject and how I came to understand just how vital Authentic Inclusion can be.